

# Hermes Trismegistus, The Three Times Great and Many Times Forged

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## **The Pseudo-epigraphy**

Currently, when an author writes a book, his copyright or the publisher's copyright is registered in a specialized body for such registration, next the work is registered in order to obtain the ISBN (International Standard Book Number). This last resource was created in 1967 and made official as an international standard in 1972. It is a numerical identification system for literary works. More recently created, another form of book identification is through barcodes. For web publications, there is now the DOI (Digital Object Identifier), an international standard for numerical identification of articles and other scientific publications on the Internet. These features clearly identify and ensure copyright under copyright laws, infringement of copyright is a criminal offense. This clear identification of the author is very important for the accurate knowledge of the true author of a work.

However, this process did not exist in the past; the works were not copyrighted, as there was no body for such a task, nor proper legislation, no numerical identification of the work and so on. Thus, the concept of authorship was very different from the current one, just as the author had no copyright protection of his work, which facilitated the falsification of authorship (pseudo-epigraphy)

of books. That is, an author could write a book and hence assign authorship to anyone he wished, as a rule, to a prestigious author, so that the work could be easily accepted.

More than with the authors of other subjects, this procedure was frequent among the religious authors of the past. As a sign of humility and submission, some religious authors wrote books, but attributed the authorship to another author of greater prestige, or even to a god or goddess. Even today, with so many resources to secure copyright, there are religious adherents, researchers, and historians who do not perceive immorality or crime in these practices, claiming that these religious of the past, when writing, felt like channels of transmission of teachings from a tradition, therefore with very little, if any, individual creation in the work. Therefore, the book could be more of a compilation than an author's creation.

However, for these cases, some issues should be discussed. Firstly, how much personal creation or reproduced compilation is present in the work that does not characterize the work as a personal creation. Secondly, the issue of liability. By assigning authorship to another person, the true author is exempting himself from liability for the errors, which makes him immune, then shifting the responsibility for the errors, which the true author made, to another author. In India, a religious author often compares himself to a parrot as a sign of extreme humility in the preparation of

his book, claiming that he only repeats what he has learned from his masters. Well, comparing yourself to a parrot is really a humble comparison, because from another perspective, it is recognizing that the author reproduces what he does not understand, like a parrot. Thirdly, which is more serious, the question of cunning in attributing authorship to another prestigious author or a god. The underlying intention is to enforce acceptance and prestige using the authority of another author.

A similar example well known in Hinduism is *Krshna Dwaipāyana Vyāsa* (कृष्णद्वैपायन व्यास), to whom many works are attributed, such as the four Vedas (over ten thousand hymns), the *Mahābhārata* (one hundred thousand couplets), the 18 *Purānas* (about 400,000 couplets), the *Brahma Sūtra*, the *Yoga Sūtra Bhāṣya* and a further controversial amount of pseudo-epigraphs. The justification of some Hindu authors for the authorship of so many and so long works is that *Vyāsa* is not an author *per se*, but the name of a compiler post held by different authors, so sometimes the *Vyāsa* name is translated by compiler. If so, the justification is not yet complete, as the names *Krshna* and *Dwaipāyana* specify a particular *vyāsa* (compiler), namely the dark-skinned (*Krshna*), generated by the goddess *Saraswatī* and residing on an island (*dwipa*), hence the word *Dwaipāyana* (resident on an island). So if the name of one compiler (*vyāsa*) is specified, what is the name of the other *vyāsas*?

For, a very common fact in the history of offices is one to occupy a position, and to know the name of this occupant of the position.

The practice of pseudo-epigraphy proved efficient over time in order to achieve acceptance and prestige, since the names of sages and usurped gods functioned as a "seal" for the legitimacy of the newly written text, hence its consequent credibility and acceptance in the relevant environment. Authors such as Hermes Trismegistus, Vyāsa, and others functioned as seals, so that, for example, if a book was authored by Hermes Trismegistus, then it would be an accepted book. Something as if the pseudo-epigraph worked as the gateway to canonization, or something like what we today call the "seal of quality". This seal eventually extended to the system, so Florian Ebeling noted, "Hermeticism seems to have become a seal with which a text and its factual content could provoke recognition of its orthodoxy and its truth" (Ebeling, 2007: 75). Then, with the growing prestige of the hermetic seal, within the esoteric environment, the number of writings in the name of this tradition multiplied. A recent example was the book *Kybalion: The Hermetic Philosophy of Ancient Egypt and Greece*, written by Three Initiates and published in 1908. This book is not mentioned in the *Hermetica*<sup>1</sup>, nor

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<sup>1</sup> *Hermetica* is a Latin adjective in the plural of *hermeticum* (hermetic), so it means "hermetic". Over time, it has become

by the hermeticists of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Certainly, a late hermetic text, when it had merged with new ideas to add to the many other obsolete doctrines of the past. Finally, the book that has the signature of Hermes Trismegistus or Hermeticism gets immediate acceptance in the esoteric environment.

Over time, the practice of pseudo-epigraphy became so common and acceptable that, due to the uncertainties of authorship, authorship was attributed to the most illustrious characters. Therefore, Christian Bull noted, “Hermetic treatises are attributed to either Hermes or his disciples, which means that we do not know who actually wrote them. This places the *Hermetica* in the genre of pseudo-epigraphy, in which we find texts that are attributed to mythical figures such as Orpheus, Museum, Enoch and Seth, or erroneously attributed to historical (but sometimes semi-legendary) figures such as Zarathustra, Homer, Pythagoras, Jesus and his Apostles” (Bull, 2018: 03).<sup>2</sup>

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conventional to call *Hermetica* the texts most directly related to Hermes Trismegistus. Which texts are included or not in *Hermetica* varies from collection to collection, according to the criteria of the author or publisher, as well as the discovery of new texts. The most up-to-date collection is published and commented on by Xavier Renau Nebot, *Textos Herméticos*, Editorial Gredos, 1999, which included recent discoveries.

<sup>2</sup> The followers of Hermeticism regarded Hermes Trismegistus as the first philosopher and the first prophet of mankind, so all the other sages and mystics who emerged

## The Author that Never Existed

The case above is that of Hermes Trismegistus (Ερμης Τρισμεγιστος). Because it never existed, all authorships of works attributed to him are pseudo-epigraphs. When he is not the author, he is the protagonist, or both at the same time, author and protagonist. For example: the first chapter of *Corpus Hermeticum*, known as *Poimandres* (Ποιμανδρης), a dialogue between Hermes Trismegistus and *Poimandres*, the latter is the Thought (*nous*)<sup>3</sup> of the Supreme Power (*authentēs*). Hermes is the author and the character (interlocutor) of dialogue with *Poimandres*. The same happens in other works. Therefore, because he never existed, but was present in the imagination for many centuries, Florian Ebeling called it “phantom” and noted, “The heroic patron of Hermeticism never existed; Hermes Trismegistus was a fiction, a fruitful fiction with lasting effects. The figure of this legendary Egyptian sage arose from the fusion of two deities of highly divergent origin: the Egyptian god Thoth and the Greek Hermes” (Ebeling, 2007: 03). This

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next were his disciples, so any of these could be the author of a hermetic work.

<sup>3</sup> The translation of the Greek term *nous* (νοϋς) is divergent, sometimes translated by intellect, sometimes by mind, soul or thought, so some authors prefer not to translate it.

fusion may have occurred during the Hellenistic period. The epithet "Trismegistus" means "Three Times Great" and is taken from the Egyptian god Thoth, who was already known by this epithet in Egypt before syncretism (Ebeling, 2007: 03-7 and Bull, 2018: 33s). In Roman mythology, Hermes was known as Mercury. The epithet "Three Times Great" (Τρισμεγιστος - Trismegistos; Latin: *Termaximus*) is attributed to him, according to some authors, because Hermes Trismegistus was a god, a king, and a wise man, although when we read the extensive hermetic literature, we realize that he was much more than just Three Times Great, far more than that in myths, he was Many Times Great, since he performed countless functions, as we shall see later.

### **The "Jack for all the Trades"**

As mentioned above, he was a mythological character, but not just any character, but, like an actor who is able to play different roles in different plays or movies, he appears in the hermetic texts as a protagonist "handyman" and with a very diverse versatility. Besides knowing countless subjects, he presents himself sometimes as a god, sometimes as a king, as a wizard, as a teacher of wisdom, as a doctor, an astrologer, an alchemist, a prophet, an educator, a fortune teller, a literacy teacher, a pyramid builder and so on. Anyway, Hermes Trismegistus would be that



versatile actor that all filmmakers would always like to have at their disposal, or the “handyman” that every employer would like to have in his staff.

### **The Hermetic Literature**

Many think that Hermeticism is simply synonymous with esotericism, magic, alchemy or occultism. This is an idea resulting from the unfolding of Hermeticism after centuries of absorbing ideas and practices from other traditions, thus a contemporary concept of a very developed and diverse Hermeticism. Strictly speaking, Hermeticism was different at different times in its evolution, as well as in different regions (e.g. Arabian Hermeticism, Alexandria Hermeticism, Greco-Roman Hermeticism, Medieval Hermeticism, etc.), so it can be conceptualized in a way in Antiquity, another in Middle Ages, another in Renaissance and another in Contemporary Age. Over time, new texts were composed and attached to the hermetic tradition. Therefore, it is difficult today to reconcile the opinions of different authors as to which texts belong or not to the hermetic literature, the criterion varies from author to author. Kevin Van Bladel noted, “... there is no consensus among scholars today about which works can be considered *Hermetica*” (Van Bladel, 2009: 18). Thus, some researchers prefer to consider as hermetic those texts with direct relation to Hermes

Trismegistus, that is, those whose authorship is attributed to him or those in which he is a character in the dialogue, this was the criterion used by Florian Ebeling to circumscribe the limits of his history of Hermeticism (Ebeling, 2007: 07-9).

In the early 3rd century c. e., Clement of Alexandria recorded in his work *Stromata*, a number of hermetic writings that were carried during a procession of Egyptian worship. At the beginning of the procession were the divine hermetic hymns and the royal biography. Astrological books dealing with fixed stars, planets and their movements were followed by hieroglyphic inscriptions on geographical subjects, following which the books were dealing with education and worship practices. There were books about the laws, about the gods, and about the training of priests. There were 36 hermetic books containing the entire philosophy of the Egyptians, which were complemented by six books on medical issues. However, these numbers are very modest when compared to the 36,525 hermetic books noted by Menetho or the 20,000 mentioned by Seleucus (Ebeling, 2007: 09). However, these books did not survive, so we do not know their contents, of what we currently have, the following are the fundamental texts of the tradition of Hermes Trismegistus, divided into two categories:

- a) The philosophical-religious texts (Theology, Creationism, Cosmogogenesis, Soteriology, Cosmology, etc., and
- b) The technical texts (Astrology, Magic, Alchemy, Healing, etc.).

The philosophical-religious texts are the *Hermetica*, which include the following works:

- 1) The *Corpus Hermeticum*, a collection of eighteen treatises (treatise XV is lost) composed between the 1st and 3rd centuries and preserved in Greek language through Byzantine manuscripts from 14th to 16th centuries. The critical edition of the Greek text, now considered by scholars to be the reference, is that of A. J. Festugière and D. Nock, published with notes and French translation in the years 1945-54.
- 2) The *Asclepius* (Greek: *Logos Teleios*; Latin: *Sermo Perfectum*), a collection of discourses by Hermes Trismegistus for his disciple *Asclepius*, composed between the 2nd and 3rd centuries. The original complete Greek is lost, there are only fragments in Greek, survived completely only through Latin translations. A Coptic language version of paragraphs 21-29 was found among the manuscripts of the *Nag Hammadi* library in 1945. The most important Latin manuscripts are from the 12th and 13th centuries.
- 3) The *Stobaeus Extracts*, a compilation of 29 extracts from hermetic texts collected by John Stobaeus in the 5th century. c. e., for the education

of his son, with some relatively extensive extracts, especially extract XXIII, the *Kóré Kósmou*.

4) The *Coptic Texts of the Nag Hammadi Library*, found in 1945. Of the five hermetic texts included in this library, two were previously unknown: *The Discourse of the Eighth and Ninth*, and *The Thanksgiving Prayer*.

5) Fragments of hermetic texts preserved in the writings of the Church Fathers (Tertullian, Lactantius, Augustine, etc.).

6) *The Definitions of Hermes Trismegistus for Asclepius*, a collection of aphorisms, preserved in Armenian language translated from Greek and composed in Greek probably in the late 6th century c. e.

7) Small hermetic fragments in papyrus discovered in archives and libraries in the last half of the twentieth century.

As for *Corpus Hermeticum*, Wouter J. Hanegraaff noted, "We do not know how many philosophical *Hermetica* may have existed or in what order they should originally be read. The collection known today by *Corpus Hermeticum* was assembled in Byzantium during the Middle Ages and appears to have been vaguely known in its present form since Michael Psellus in the 11th century. It consists of 17 treatises, confusingly listed as I-XV and XVI-XVIII since the 16th century (the standard enumeration derives from the first modern editor of the Greek text, Adrien Turnèbe, who, in 1554, included some hermetic extracts by

Stobaeus, such as Chapter XV of the *Corpus*, editors later retained Turnèbe's enumeration, but withdrew Chapter XV" (Hanegraaff, 2018: 02).

The technical texts are:

- 1) Many astrological writings are attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, especially detailed is the *Book on the Thirty-Six Decans*, composed perhaps in the first century c. e.
- 2) Hermes as a wizard and healer, as mentioned in the *Greek Magic Papyri*, composed between the 2nd and 4th centuries c. e. Hermes also appears as a magical healer in the well-known *Cyranidi*, composed between the 1st and 4th centuries c. e.
- 3) Hermes is also known as the author of alchemical works, he played an important role as a precursor of alchemy, as mentioned in the writings of the alchemist Zosymus of Panopolis of the late third and early fourth centuries c. e.

In addition to these works, the hermetic texts preserved in Arabic translations may be added (Van Bladel, 2009).

## **The Arabian Hermes**

The best-known Arab legend mentions the existence of three Hermeses. The first Hermes was Adam's grandson and lived before the Flood. The Hebrews considered him to be the prophet Enoch, while the Arabs considered him to be *Idrīs*, a prophet mentioned in the Quran for being correct and determined (chapter 19, verses 56-7 and

chapter 21, verses 86-7). As the first astrologer, he was instructed by Adam as to the hours that divide day and night. He built pyramids and cities in Upper Egypt where he lived and warned of the destruction of the world by water and fire. In order to save the flourishing antediluvian science from destruction during the Flood, he built a temple and engraved all his scientific knowledge by carving it into the walls. The second Hermes lived after the Babylonian Flood (ancient Egypt) and was known to have taught Pythagoras philosophy and mathematics. The third Hermes continued the tradition, again in Egypt. He wrote a book on alchemy and was the master of *Asclepius* (Ebeling, 2007: 45, for more details, see Van Bladel, 2009: 121s). Therefore, this third Hermes is what is known as Hermes Trismegistus.

Although without consensus, Hermes is the prophet *Idrīs* in the interpretation of some Muslims, with whom the Jews identify with Enoch, mentioned in two passages of the Quran, “Also mention in the Quran the story of *Idrīs*. He was a real man, a prophet. We raise him to a high position” (19: 56-7). “And remember Ishmael, *Idrīs*, and *Dhul Kifl*,<sup>4</sup> they were all determined. We admit them to our compassion, they were truly virtuous” (21: 86-7).

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<sup>4</sup> Some authors suggest that this is the prophet Ezekiel.

Arabic Hermeticism emphasizes practical themes (alchemy, astrology, magic, etc.) rather than philosophical-religious themes, as in *Corpus Hermeticum*, so that in Arabic Hermetic literature, Hermes is more of a magician than to a wise man (see, Van Bladel, 2009).

### **The Delusions of the Renaissance**

In 1460, an agent of Cosino de Medice brought from Byzantium to Florence a Greek manuscript of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. The work impressed the intellectuals of the Florentine Academy. Cosino immediately asked Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) to interrupt his translations of Plato and begin the Latin translation of this hermetic text. Ficino finished the Latin translation of *Corpus* in 1463, which was published in 1471, under the title *Poimander* (name of *Corpus'* first treatise), but only the I-XIV treatises. The Latin translation of the XVI-XVIII treatises was completed by Lodovico Lazzarelli (1447-1500) and published in 1507 after his death (the text of the 15th treatise is lost). This event began a wave of enthusiasm for Hermeticism in Italy, whose resonance would spread across Europe, however, somewhat differently from the tradition that had been preserved during the Middle Ages, namely, the well-known Hermetic tradition overloaded with alchemy, as preserved during the Middle Ages, Europe now found the philosophical-religious

tradition of the hermetic tradition through the publications of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the *Asclepius*.

In order to clearly differentiate between these two hermetic traditions, namely, the technical tradition (alchemy, astrology, magic, etc.) and the philosophical-religious tradition (theology, cosmology, soteriology, etc.), some authors who write in the English language, suggest changing the broad English denomination “Hermeticism”, which encompasses the generality of occult arts, to the English denomination “Hermetism”, the latter referring only to the philosophical-religious tradition, also known as Alexandrian Hermeticism, because it was written by Hellenized Egyptian priests. Antoine Faivre explained: “Gradually, Hermes and Hermeticism increasingly came to mean alchemy or theosophy - or esotericism in the modern sense of the term” (Faivre, 1995: 60, 39 and Hanegraaff, 2018: 02). At the time of the new resurgence of Hermeticism in the nineteenth century, with the founding of hermetic groups such as the *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*, *Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor*, *Mysteria Mystica Aeterna* and *Esoteric School of the Theosophical Society*, Hermeticism had already become a common name for the diverse forms of occult arts (alchemy, astrology, magic, tarot, numerology, palmistry, etc.), with such scope that an author has defined it as “a thing without corners and ends” (Ebeling, 2007: 11).



Marsilio Ficino, in the preface to his Latin translation of the *Corpus*, using mythological rather than historical data, praised Hermes Trismegistus as the founder of philosophy (*priscus theologus*). This preface was influential in his day and in the following years until the challenge of Hermes Trismegistus' antiquity and hermetic texts by Isaac Casaubon in 1614. Based on the myths of the Neoplatonism and Christian authors of classical antiquity, Ficino developed a fanciful genealogy from Hermes Trismegistus to Plato, who reached influential consequences, "As the first philosopher, he (Hermes) turned from natural things and mathematics to the contemplation of the divine. He was the first to find out, with great wisdom, the majesty of God, the ordering of spirits, and the changes of the soul. He was called the first author of theology. He was followed by Orpheus, who obtained the second position among the ancient theologians. Aglaofemo was initiated into the Orphic mysteries; Pythagoras followed him in theology and was later followed by Philolaus, who was the master of the divine Plato. Then there arose a single and internally consistent primordial theology (*prisca theologia*)" (Ebeling, 2007: 62).

Therefore, these are the six firstborns of philosophy (*prisci theologi*). This genealogy of Ficino is one among others created by sympathizers of Hermes Trismegistus from Antiquity to the Renaissance (Cicero, Augustine, Lactantius, Patrizi, etc.). For him, Hermes

Trismegistus preceded Moses and other biblical prophets. In a slightly different way, Francesco Patrizi (1529-1597) also created a fanciful genealogy of *Prisca Theologia*, which began with “Zoroaster, who is considered to be the author of the Chaldean Oracles. Zoroaster founded colonies in Egypt and found a descendant in King Osiris, who had a counselor named Hermes Trismegistus. The latter's grandson was also called Hermes Trismegistus. After Zoroaster, this Hermes, who lived before Moses, was the second most important philosopher. Since wisdom had survived among the Egyptian priests, Orpheus and Pythagoras were initiated into it while they were in Egypt. Even Plato was in this tradition of wisdom, which was interrupted, however, by Aristotle. It was Amonio Sakkas (175-242 c. e.), the founder of the Neoplatonic school, who once again brought life to this ancient wisdom of Zoroaster and Hermes Trismegistus. Because of its Aristotelian seal, the Middle Ages interrupted this tradition until Raymond Lulo (1235-1315) and Paracelsus (1493-1541) renewed it once again” (Ebeling, 2007: 68-9). Anyway, all these genealogists of the early philosophers were confusing myth with history.

Then, over time, increasingly eclectic and delusional genealogies were created; Antoine Faivre mentioned a typical list or philosophical genealogy, which took the following form: Enoch, Abraham, Noah, Zoroaster, Moses, Hermes Trismegistus, the Brahmins, the Druids, David,

Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato and the Sibyls” (Faivre, 1995: 39). The inclusion of Brahmins and Druids in this list is not only strange, but also comical. Well, are all the millions of Brahmins, present and past, included in this list? Even those of the Vedic times who performed the पुरुषमेध - *purushamedha* (human sacrifice) and the अश्वमेध - *ashwamedha* (horse sacrifice), as reported in the ancient *Brāhmanas* texts, were also philosophers? In the same way, were even the Druid priests, who had no writing and were illiterate, philosophers? Can an illiterate be a philosopher and is there philosophy without literature?

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Ficino's delusions were so fanciful that he even said, "he (Hermes Trismegistus) often spoke not only as a philosopher but also as a prophet. He foresaw the fall of the ancient religions, the coming of Christ, the coming Day of Judgment, the Resurrection, the glory of the blessed, and the punishment of sinners" (Ebeling, 2007: 62). Well, if we believe all that is attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, he was not only philosopher and prophet; he was much more than this: ruler, wizard, master, alchemist, astrologer, doctor, builder, fortuneteller, literator, scribe, priest, etc.

### **The Cold Water Shower**

However, this delirious Hermetic feast had an end to many gullible in these fantasies and the "spoiler" was the preacher and humanist Isaac Casaubon (1559-1614), who demonstrated, through serious historical, linguistic and philological research, published in 1614, which Hermes Trismegistus could not be as old as his admirers imagined, as well as made strong arguments that the texts of *Corpus Hermeticum* and the *Asclepius* were composed between the 1st and 4th centuries c. e. and not in the remote antiquity attributed by the renaissancists, for being full of Hellenistic and Christian ideas. A concrete evidence that the *Corpus Hermeticum* could not be

so ancient, as its dazzling admirers pointed out, is the mention in the treatise 18th § 04 of the famous Greek sculptor, *Phidias* (Φειδίας - *Pheidias*), who lived from 480 to 430 b. c. e.: "If in particular the matter which *Phidias*, the sculptor, used had not obeyed him ..." (see: Festugière, 1945-54, tome II: 249; Nebot, 1999: 239; Ebeling, 2007: 92 and Regal, 2009: 78).

Based on his extensive historical and philological knowledge of Greek language, Casaubon argued, "*Corpus Hermeticum* uses concepts that may not have originated in such a remote era. If the texts of *Corpus Hermeticum* are indeed pre-Christian, they should not exhibit an important stylistic difference from that of the earliest Greek writers, such as Herodotus. Language, however, clearly uses a late style, in particular it employs many words that appeared in Greek only after the birth of Christ" (Ebeling, 2007: 92). In addition, Casaubon did not believe that Hermes Trismegistus was the author and called the author of *Corpus Hermeticum* a forger (idem: 92). He also pointed out the similarities between New Testament and *Corpus Hermeticum* phrases, arguing that the latter could not be pre-Christian. In addition, that the *Corpus* texts did not record ancient Egyptian wisdom, but were actually a cluster of Platonic and Christian concepts written after the time of Christ (Idem: 91 and Van Bladel, 2009: 06-7).

Although Casaubon is unanimously considered the great contender of the remote antiquity of *Corpus Hermeticum*, more specifically, Wouter J. Hanegraaff noted that before Casaubon, Adrien Turnèbe's disciple Gilbert Genebrard, Matthieu Bérolalde and Jean van Gorp had already been criticizing the remote antiquity of *Corpus Hermeticum* since 1567. Therefore, Casaubon seems to have been only the final and culminating protagonist of a debate that had begun almost a century earlier (Hanegraaff, 2018: 07 and Ebeling, 2007: 95). It seems that alchemy was not immediately affected by Casaubon's criticism, but another author, Hermann Conring, professor of medicine at Helmstedt University, published in 1648 a book contesting the validity of Paracelsus alchemy. He agreed that the books, attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, were counterfeits. He also claimed that a man of this name never existed and that Egyptian medicine was pure superstition, far more so than Greek, as well as mathematics, physics and philosophy (Ebeling, 2007: 97).

The works of Isaac Casaubon and Hermann Conring affected like cold-water showers on the enthusiasm of the hermeticists at that time and the following generations, the cooling was so strong that, between 1630 and 1856, there were no publications of hermetic texts, due to the falling interest in the subject (Faivre, 1995: 186s and Van Bladel, 2009: 06). Interest would only resurface in the mid-nineteenth century with the formation of

hermetic groups, mixing all the occult arts into one cauldron called Hermeticism.

### **Criticism**

From a critical point of view, it can be defined, simply and briefly, that Hermeticism is the most successful intellectualization of superstition. For, in history, no other ancient superstition has been able to clothe itself with such intellectuality as Hermeticism. In a way, it is a curious example of how the human imagination is capable of transforming a superstitious culture into an intellectualized and sophisticated culture capable of drawing educated personalities and upper-class individuals into its entourage. For it is an assorted mix of Egyptian mythology, religious superstitions, and rational Hellenistic philosophy. Unlike the superstitions of uncultured beliefs, which have no literature, let alone exegesis, hermetic ideas, in turn, are superstitions with extensive revealing and exegetical literature, clothed with language and sophisticated rituals that cover them with an intellectual veneer (thanks to the intrusion of Greek philosophical ideas), so brilliant and seductive to those who delight in speculation and ancient practices. Then, their speculations assume the appearance of scientificity. Therefore, it is not without reason that Brian Regal included the doctrine of Hermes Trismegistus as an example of pseudoscience in his encyclopedia

*Pseudoscience: A Critical Encyclopedia* (Regal, 2009: 78-9). The reason for this inclusion lies in the insistence of supporters and admirers to term the rudimentary speculations of Hermes Trismegistus, and his followers, as "Hermetic Science" or "Hermetic Philosophy". When such an author names them in this way, he is ignoring the evolutionary character of the sciences and philosophies, for what was known as science at the time of the composition of the first hermetic texts (early centuries of the Common Era), today these teachings are recognized as primitive speculations. Because the scientific methodologies used in these two eras are vastly different.

Hermetic doctrines are sometimes so bizarre and absurd for the newcomer to read this subject that a scientifically and rationally-trained skeptic, for the first time reading, may form the idea that the doctrine of this ancient tradition is the product of a schizophrenic delirium. The same will not be noticed by one accustomed to reading about the culture and religions of Antiquity. Hermetic doctrines fit this age perfectly, as they were drawn from contemporary ideas in other systems.

Hermetic communication reminds us of that interesting example, quoted by persuasion psychologists, that persuasive art of persuading someone else more by the cunning of rhetoric, by the eloquence, by fascination, by brilliant oratory, or by persuasive argument, than by the message



content itself, that is, more by its form than by its content. The example of this is mentioned by persuasion researchers through the experience of someone who admires a painting picture by the beauty of the frame rather than by the beauty of the painting itself, that is, the beauty of the frame suggests the viewer's opinion about the beauty of the painting. This is often the case for paying more attention to the external form than to the content, such as judging a book by its cover or a movie by its poster. In same manner, Hermeticism seduces by the curiosity of the mysteries (the truth is hidden in the ancient mysteries), the enchantment of the rituals (the rituals reproduce the realities that the intelligence cannot understand), the enigma of the symbols (the more symbolic, the more true), the antiquity of the doctrines (the older, the wiser), the timeliness of the initiations (only the initiate knows the truth), the wisdom of the myths (the fancier, the more meaningful) and the dazzling revelation. However, from a measured perspective, all this seductive attraction masks a multitude of delusional revelations, groundless speculations and superstitious practices.

### **The Disappointment with Obsolescence**

That in esoteric groups, as in popular churches, the number of dissenters disappointed with what they have learned or experienced is large, only those who attend can know, since these

groups, like the churches, hide these facts. Therefore, turnover of members is high. Indeed, there are many who leave these esoteric groups out of deception, and one of the most frequent disappointments is the recognition of the obsolete doctrines and the superstitions of practices. When the moment arrives, the adept is capable of isolating the exaltations, the unfounded hopes, the utopian promises, the fascination, and the praises, which underlie the esoteric doctrines and practices, and then he is able to perceive behind these seductive cloaks a set of ideas and practices that are only valid for the culture of Antiquity and Middle Ages. For esotericism is more fascination than reality, also, the seduction of mystery and the occult hinders the perception of obsolescence and makes ancient ideas seem current.

The remedy for this evolutionary blindness is the study of the history of ideas, but not based on the version of tradition, but on the version of academic and unbiased studies independent of the traditional version. The study of history has always been a nuisance for religions, and inevitably for esotericism, since it can point out how much doctrines are based on myths and rumors, which lack historicity.

### **The Disappointment with Secret**

Hermeticism, along with other esoteric traditions (Rosicrucian Fraternity, Freemasonry,

Theosophical Society, and others), overemphasizes secrecy. The initiate is obliged to keep a secret about some revelations given to him, as well as about the rituals. For these initiatic traditions, secrecy is a powerful force. For it helps in preserving the sacredness of esoteric doctrines, preventing them from falling into the hands of unprepared individuals to receive them. This is the esoteric version.

However, an occurrence is common among those who venture into these esoteric schools, namely, disappointment with these secrets, for two reasons. Firstly, the discovery that these secrets are not really so secret, since if the initiate is willing to research, he will find that these secrets are available in dozens of openly published books. Secondly, what is even more disappointing is that these secrets or mysteries are not great things, that is, they are obsolete ideas, superstitions, beliefs and useless practices.

For example, hermeticists since ancient times regard their doctrines and practices as highly secretive, so much so that the word "hermetic" has become synonymous with something very secretive. This feeling of secrecy was revived during the Renaissance, through the admiration and exaltation of Marsilio Ficino, Giordano Bruno and others, when Hermeticism had already become a nearly forgotten tradition. However, recent academic and historical studies have revealed that the hermetic doctrines are not so

secret, since they are a mixture of Egyptian, Platonic, Pythagorean, Neoplatonic, Jewish, Persian, Christian, Neopitagoric, and Gnostic doctrines, of which we have abundant publications (to delve into the history of the tradition of Hermes Trismegistus, the reference works are: Faivre, 1995; Broek, 1998; Ebeling, 2007 and Bull, 2018). There is also hermetic Arabic literature, translated from Persian and Greek, hence the creation of an "Arabian Hermes" (see: Van Bladel, 2009). For the sources of Hermetic ideas in its main texts (*Hermetica*), consult the Spanish translations of Xavier Renau Nebot, *Textos Herméticos*, 1999, with abundant notes identifying the doctrinal sources of Hermeticism.

Strictly speaking, Hermeticism is formed from such a diverse mix of ideas that researchers and historians still discuss how much Egyptian ideas are present in Hermetic doctrine. Until a few decades ago, it was thought that Hermeticism had no Egyptian elements in its doctrines, only the syncretism between the Egyptian god Thoth and the Greek god Hermes. However, this view changed after the discovery of Hermetic texts in the Coptic language among the manuscripts of the *Nag Hammadi* library, these are *The Discourse of the Eighth and Ninth*, *The Prayer of Thanksgiving* and *Asclepius* 21-29 (Parrott, 1990: 321-38 and Nebot, 1999: 247-56 and 493-501).

During the Renaissance, the admiration for Hermeticism was so delirious, by some

enthusiasts, that versions were created extolling Hermes Trismegistus as the father of philosophy, that Pythagoras was his disciple, that he lived in a very remote antiquity, therefore prior to Moses, that he was the founder of wisdom in the world, etc. In the Renaissance, understanding of hieroglyphic writing was no longer possible, that is, understanding of writing had been lost, so delirious hermeticists fantasized about the idea that hieroglyphs contained great wisdom in their writings. The most fanciful, and to some extent comic case was the English esotericist Athanasius Kircher (1601-1680), who hastily ventured to translate some hieroglyphics available at the time, claiming to have been able to decipher Egyptian writing, that is, before the definitive deciphering of Jean-François Champollion in 1822. Kircher imagined that hieroglyphics guarded hermetically encrypted religious and mystical messages, and then translated them from this assumption. After the definitive and universally accepted decipher of Champollion, it was found that Kircher's fanciful translations of hieroglyphics with religious messages were, in fact, administrative communications, accounts of triumphs in battle, pharaoh edicts, and other bureaucratic texts. Though there are religious texts in hieroglyphics, but these were not what Kircher tried to translate. To learn more of Athanasius Kircher's fanciful conceptions, see John Glassie's book, *A Man of*

*Misconceptions: The Life of an Eccentric in an Age of Change*, 2012).

In addition, in the book *Picatrix*, much esteemed by Arab hermeticists, it is mentioned "the ancient Egyptian Hermetic wisdom was such a powerful instrument that it had to be coded into hieroglyphics" (Obeling, 2007: 47). The Arab hermeticists, without understanding the ancient Egyptian writing, also imagined that hieroglyphics recorded hermetic secrets, records that until now have not been found after so many years of archaeological exploration in Egypt. The proof that the hermeticists were delirious when claiming that Egyptian hieroglyphics recorded hermetic wisdom came with the founding of the Egyptology, after deciphering by J. F. Champollion in 1822, when, since then, it was not possible to find in the hundreds of hieroglyphic texts already found by excavation in Egypt, which were later deciphered and translated, not even one mentioning the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the *Asclepius*, the Emerald Tablet or any of the other *Hermetica* texts (Ebeling, 2007: 131). Egyptian hieroglyphics are dumb about Hermetic literature. Thus, the deciphering of the hieroglyphics was another "cold water shower" for hermeticists and supporters. Florian Ebeling noted, "Both the figure and writings of Hermes Trismegistus are the product of a syncretism of the Hellenistic philosophy of nature, which was itself an agglomeration of Pythagorean, Stoic, Platonic, and Aristotelian doctrines interspersed with motifs

from Egyptian mythology and themes of Iranian and Jewish origin” (Ebeling, 2007: 09).

Also in the hermetic texts, the influence of Christian doctrine can be added, since in these, especially in *Corpus Hermeticum* and *Asclepius*, Christian terminologies appear as in the passages of *Corpus Hermeticum*, chap. I (*Poimandres*), § 05 and 06: “Holy Word” (ἅγιος λόγος - *agios logos*), “Son of God” (υἱος θεου - *uios theou*), as in the phrase λόγος υἱος θεου (*logos uios theou*) “Logos is the Son of God”, also in the phrase: νοὺς πατὴρ (*nous pater*) “Thought (*nous*) is the Father” (see: Nebot, 1999: 77 and Salaman, 2000: 18). Also, in treatise XIII § 02, the phrase: “God the son of God” (Θεου θεος παῖς - *Theou theos pais*) (Festugière, 1945-54, tome II: 201, Nebot, 1999: 207 and Salaman, 2000: 65).

Despite the immense influence and dependence of Greek culture on the composition of the Hermetic texts, since most were composed and preserved in the Greek language, or translated from Greek to Latin or Arabic, note the insult to the Greek people and the Greek language in *Corpus Hermeticum* XVI, § 01-2: *Asclepius* said Hermes used to say that “those who will read my books will find the composition simple and clear, while obscure and hidden the meaning of the words and that it will be even more obscure when the Greeks later translate them from our language (Egyptian) into their own (Greek), which will lead to a complete distortion of the text and its total

obscurity". And further on: "... well preserves this discourse from all translation so that such great mysteries do not reach the Greeks and that their proud utterance, with their lack of sensitivity and what might be said to be false graces, make the gravity, the solidity, the effective virtue of the words of our language. For the Greeks, ó king, have only empty speeches, good for the purpose of demonstration; and this is what is the whole philosophy of the Greeks, a rumor of words. As for us, we do not use simple words, but sounds full of efficacy" (Festugière, 1945: tome II, 231-3; Nebot, 1999: 226-7 and Salaman: 2000: 74).

Among others, a curiosity in the above warnings is that "such great mysteries do not reach the Greeks", being that almost all the doctrines mentioned in *Corpus Hermeticum* are of Greek origin. Now, how can we prevent hermetic ideas from reaching the Greeks if they came largely from the Greeks?

### **Personal Disappointment**

I myself experienced this disappointment when, after starting studying and beginning to practice discipline in an esoteric institution from India, after a few years I decided in the 1980s to take a trip to that country for further study of the doctrine and for initiation into studies of the Sanskrit language. During the years I attended this esoteric group, I was indoctrinated in the idea that



some doctrines and practices were very secretive, so reserved for the initiates, which could not be made public. Therefore, the publications of this esoteric institution were not sold in bookstores, only to members of the *ashrams*, because they were so secretive. Then, being there, when I was able to start reading in this ancient language, I began to realize that many doctrines and practices, considered highly esoteric, were common with some currents of Hinduism, the most popular religion in India, with about one billion of followers. That is, these teachings and rituals were popularly known and practiced in Hindu religion.

I remember the disappointment when I first encountered a guidebook for the performance of the *Sandhyāvandana* (संध्यावन्दन)<sup>5</sup> ritual at the home of a relative of my instructor, an ancient Vedic ritual performed by thousands of Brahmins for many centuries, during the dawn or twilight of day or night, most commonly at dawn. This ancient Vedic ritual (like almost all ancient practices, is superstitious) is the same as in the esoteric institution that it attended, it is practiced under the misrepresented name of “Health Ritual”,<sup>6</sup> this,

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<sup>5</sup> संध्या (*sandhyā*) literally means 'junction', therefore junction of day and night, i.e. 'dawn' or 'twilight'. वन्दन (*vandana*) means “worship,” so *sandhyāvandana* means “dawn or twilight worship.”

<sup>6</sup> It was named like this here in the West because of the ritual of invoking ancient Vedic gods through *mantras* and gestures in order to magnetize the water that is then touched in

rather than being performed daily at dawn, here in the West was practiced on Sunday morning in order to resemble the Catholic mass. In Hinduism, *Sandhyāvandana* is a domestic ritual, where the Brahmin performs the ritual for his family, whereas here in the West it is a collective ritual practiced in the *ashrams*. This event began my disappointment at the esotericism of this institution I frequented because, from my knowledge of the Sanskrit language, I discovered so many things in common with popular and superstitious Hinduism.

In addition, the disappointments with the practical disciplines. After initiation, the novice receives from his instructor the disciplines to be performed individually (relaxing, breathing exercises, concentration, visualization, imagination, meditation, etc.), according to his degree, by the oath not to reveal the nature of them. As the degrees progress, the initiate is informed that practices become more secretive and more powerful. Disappointment happens when the practitioner is curious to research, then finds that those secret practices are publicly known, some taught in popular books, in courses open to all, in collective practices, and some are even

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different parts of the body (eyes, nose, ears, belly, etc.) with the intention of providing health or healing. There is no properly scientific confirmation that ritual magnetized water has a salutary and therapeutic effect, only confirmations of pseudoscientific experiments.

advised against by doctors and psychiatrists, risks of damage to physical or mental health.

Sometimes in the esoteric institutions in which the instructions are revealed or the disciplines practiced according to the disciple's degrees (e.g., Rosicrucian and Freemasonry), secrets are revealed through another secret in the next degree, and so on *ad infinitum*, without ever find an explanation or foundation for ideas or practices. Therefore, some critics say that these esoteric teachings are like a bottomless pit where water can never be found at the bottom.

In addition, it is curious that some esotericists often try to explain one symbolism through another symbolism, as if the presence of a similar symbol in another tradition justifies and explains the meaning of a symbol. Something like a symbol interpreting another symbol. This practice has become so common among esotericists that a topic known as "Comparative Symbolism" has been created. Two well-known comparators were René Guénon and Julius Evola. Anyway, explaining or interpreting a symbol through another symbol is not enough explanation, it is something like exchanging "six by half a dozen", that is, the inexplicability remains the same.

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